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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role of state education agencies in curriculum reform, in light of contrasting perspectives on the future of society. Current reform proposals call for more required courses and better performance by students, but such moves need to be made with a clear sense of direction. Accordingly, the problem becomes twofold: first, should the educational system set its sights on preparing students for society as presently constituted, or for the society as envisioned by the futurists? Second, should educational policymakers go along with perceived changes in the socioeconomic structure, or resist those changes deemed undesirable? A case in point is the trend toward decentralization envisioned by futurists, as set against the call by educational reformers for more stringent state standards. This paper does not seek to answer such questions; it merely raises them as issues that need further examination at the state policymaking level. Accordingly, Appendix A lists the futurists' projections and corresponding educational reform proposals, and Appendix B provides contrasting visions of a high school as seen by futurists and by educational reformers respectively. (TE)

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THE STATE EDUCATION AGENCY AND CURRICULUM IMPROVEMENT:

PATHS TOWARD EXCELLENCE

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Notes for the Chiefs

Discussion Draft

Prepared for the Chief State School Officers
of the Northwest and Pacific

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THE SEA AND CURRICULUM IMPROVEMENT:

PATHS TOWARD EXCELLENCE

It is to be expected that State Education Agencies would naturally be in the forefront of the current education reform movement, the "commitment to excellence" which was the theme of the recent annual meeting of the Council of Chief State School Officers. Nor is it surprising that the emphasis of the SEAs in carrying out their commitment has been in the area of school curriculum--what is taught and learned.

There are many other areas in which the SEAs can affect--and sometimes effect--education reform, but curriculum is the one they can most readily get their hands on, the one they can really get their teeth into. Strengthening of the financing of education is most certainly one of the prerequisites for significant education reform; more money is needed for general school support and for the nurturing of specifically targeted programs which will lead to school improvement. The structure of education, as many of the "reports" have pointed out, needs to be changed in a number of ways--more decentralizatin of decision making, for example, and more time devoted to actual instruction, either through lengthening the school day and the school year or by making better use of now-available time. The status of teachers calls for improvement on several fronts: more appropriate and more rigorous training, pre-service and in-service; more effective certification and recertification practices; markedly higher salaries, very likely tied to a yet undetermined form of recognition of different levels of quality of service and differentiation in salary schedules through providing some

sort of career ladder. Administration of the educational program needs still other changes, most notably a renewed administrative focus on instruction and a greater recognition of the school principal's leadership responsibilities. Finally, evaluation and assessment, almost all of the reform proponents agree, has to be more sharply focused on the goals and objectives of the "new basics" program, more closely reflective of the standards and expectations of the instructional program, and far more rigorous in application.

However, fundamental changes such as these--in financing, in structure, in the status and pay of teachers, in administrative practices, and in testing--are fairly long-range matters, involving the alteration of established patterns of belief and behavior and requiring the full (but often reluctant) cooperation of the public, legislatures, and the education profession.

Therefore, SEAs increasingly are homing in on the curriculum as being that part of the education enterprise most amenable to direct intervention at the state level, given current and near-future limitation of time, money, and staff. Current reports in the popular press and in education journals indicate that some forty of the states are now engaged in the process of increasing high school graduation requirements, and nearly thirty of the states are instituting some form of statewide testing program. The leadership in American education seems determined to require both more and better--more courses taken and better performance by the students in these required courses. These new emphases are undoubtedly commendable, but they do raise some disturbing questions.

What does it really mean to require, for example, three "years" of English for high school graduation? Can expectation of excellence be expressed in terms of time, or measured by the year? And what is "English"--sports English?...science-fiction?...working on the newspaper or yearbook?

The "higher standards" that are envisioned by the institution of a statewide testing program may likewise prove to be ephemeral or even chimerical--which is simply a fancy way of saying that we may not be at all sure what we're getting! Assessment of the total education effect of the New York Regents examinations, when viewed in historical perspective, can raise some doubts as to the wisdom of setting and enforcing academic "standards" at the state level. In such testing programs, the measurement of memory and recall is well served, but not so much can be said of the ability of these tests to measure the higher cognitive skills, and even less of their ability to measure the affective learnings to which nearly all of the "reform" reports give considerable attention. Those Chiefs who have recently returned from a study of Japanese education, while uniformly lavish in their praise of some aspects of that system, are just as universally critical of the educationally and psycologically negative results that can come from a system of education driven by a rigorous, centralized examination program.

Seditious as the thought may seem in these days of wide-spread approbation of the teach-more/test-more approach to excellence, it may be necessary to consider whether or not American education is in danger of being caught up in a seductively simplistic approach to education

reform. Perhaps we may find ourselves just nibbling around the edges of the real problem, which is the improvement of teaching and learning: in short, more effective schooling.

Expanded and more stringent course requirements and more demanding performance standards, as measured directly by achievement tests, are of course sound moves on the path toward educational excellence, but these moves need to be made with a clear sense of direction: where are we headed? To provide partial answer to this question it may be instructive to consider very briefly two sets of possible direction which are now being proposed.

Quite obviously, seeking a sense of direction means looking ahead, and here the projection of the social futurists can be helpful. These futurists, of course, do not all agree, inasmuch as their individual perspective, biases, and intuitions differ, but a representative sampling of their projections can be seen in the popularization of the "megatrends" which have attracted so much attention. A brief view of these megatrends can be had by referring to Appendix A, below. It will be seen that the kind of society envisioned by these futurists is one to which the educational system must first of all adapt itself; and second, one which will place certain demands upon the products of that system--the students--if education is truly to prepare these young people for the changed society into which they will be inevitably thrust.

The "futurists' future" can readily be seen as one which is both markedly different from the present and one which will continue to be characterized by fast-paced and unstoppable change.

In quite sharp contrast, however, is the view of the education reformers, those who have produced the "rising tide of reports" (which Ernie Boyer whimsically suggests is more likely to inundate and overwhelm American education than is the rising tide of mediocrity!). Reasonably thorough analysis of the reform reports leads to the conclusion that the reformers do not envision a society markedly different in the future from that which now exists. That is, most of the reform reports suggest a "new" educational system for a basically "old" society.

In seeking a sense of direction for American education, therefore, the problem becomes twofold. First, should the education system set its sights on fitting into (and preparing students for) the society that now is, or for the society that may well be emerging? Second, if there are some demonstrable changes coming in our present social/political/economic structure, should education policy makers, such as Chief State School Officers, just go along with these changes, or are some of the projected changes to be judged as intrinsically undesirable, and therefore ones to be resisted? For example, the futurists project a marked decentralization in decision making and program operation throughout society, but most of the educational reformers call for a measure, at least, of increased centralization of policy formulation and decision making in certain aspects of the education enterprise: tougher state-imposed standards for the education, certification, and recertification of teachers; more stringent state-prescribed high school graduation standards; more specific state-mandated curriculum guides; and the installation of state-level evaluation and assessment programs.

This brief paper--like most of the more than two dozen similar papers which have been prepared for the Chiefs of the Northwest and Pacific by the NWREL Center for State Studies--does not attempt to say what education policy at the state level ought to be--that is beyond our mission and beyond our competence. But it is appropriate, we believe, to raise issues that need further examination at the state policy-making level, and to suggest optional routes which might be followed toward desired goals.

Therefore, another addendum to this paper, Appendix B, invites attention to what a specific segment of the educational system--the urban high school--might look like if one or the other of two possible paths were followed--into the future as seen by the futurists, or into the future as seen by the education reformers.

Neither the issues nor the choices are clear; the future is always too cloudy for such clarity. What is abundantly clear, however, is that hard choices must be made as the SEAs continue to exert their leadership in curriculum improvement as a part of the entire education reform movement.

APPENDIX A

PROJECTED SOCIETAL CHANGES & PROPOSED EDUCATIONAL REFORMS

	THE FUTURISTS PREDICT THESE TRENDS:	THE EDUCATION REFORMERS PROPOSE THESE CHANGES:
I.	<u>From an industrial society to an information society</u>	
	(The American economy and society will henceforth be based on the production, processing, and utilization of information, not of consumer goods.)	Focusing the educational system on knowledge and information; emphasizing the centrality of "basics"; putting very heavy emphasis on what is studied, taught, and learned. Therefore, providing more academic learning time, to provide for greater concentration on cognitive content, especially the "higher-level" learnings.
II.	<u>From a "force technology" society to a "high-tech, high-touch" society</u>	
	(The smokestack, brawn and muscle industries will be replaced by a highly technical society and economy, but one which does not neglect the human touch and humane values.)	Vastly greater emphasis on technologically oriented studies, with heavy reliance on the computer. Vocational programs specifically geared to a high-tech society. Greatly increased requirements in math and science.
III.	<u>From a national economy to a regional/global economy</u>	
	(Increasing emphasis on regional concentration of industries, with a consequent need for attention to regional job markets in planning school vocational programs; but at the same time a growing need for international understanding and global thinking.	Strong emphasis on "basics" as a means of (a) defending the American economy against foreign competition, and b) insuring the employability of graduates. Development of extensive school partnerships with business, industry and labor.

IV. From a centralized to a decentralized society

(Not only the economy, but society as a whole, will increasingly operate on a more decentralized basis, with much greater dependence on locally generated solutions to problems (e.g., school-site autonomy); hence, a greater emphasis on the individual's taking responsibility for his own decisions and actions.)

This trend is considered in the reform reports only in the most tangential fashion.

The only specific relevant suggestions are for an increase in the school principal's on-site responsibility, especially for instructional leadership; a greater emphasis on developing individual students' sense of responsibility; and more localized determination of educational goals.

V. From representative to participative democracy

(Important social and political decisions will increasingly be made by the processes of initiative and referendum.)

Very little attention is given to this trend by the educational reform proponents, except for the strong plea in the Excellence report for more parental and student assumption of responsibility.

VI. From a hierarchical to a network society

(There will be less central direction of all human activities, with more stress on working together within the bonds of common interests, knowledge, and goals.)

The educational reform reports do not specifically address this issue.

VII. From an either/or to a multiple-options society

(In Naisbit's phrase, more of a "Baskin-Robbins society," one less marked by singleness of purpose, rigidity, dogmatism, and authoritarianism.)

The educational reformers substantially reject this projection, seeking instead to instill into the educational system a greater commonality of agreement on both the ends and the means of education.

APPENDIX B

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE "EXCELLENT" URBAN HIGH SCHOOL
IN THE LATE EIGHTIES

Views from Two Contemporary Perspectives

I. AN "INFORMATION" SOCIETY

The Futurists

Entire program is characterized by heavy reliance on electronic instructional technology.

Curriculum is compressed into blocks of useful (market-oriented) information.

Students are viewed primarily as potential workers in preparation for entrance into an information-handling society.

Skills taught are job-oriented (e.g., "higher-order learnings" not for overall intellectual and personal development, but because they represent saleable skills, essential for later employment).

The Education Reformers

Instructional technology is viewed as an essential element in a total program of effective schooling.

The information needed for living in an "information" society is of two related kinds: "basic skills" content comprising a body of non-fungible knowledge, enriched by other equally basic knowledge of the arts, physical fitness, and citizenship.

Students are viewed not merely as potential handlers or manipulators of information, but as producers and evaluators of information as well.

Skills taught are multifaceted: intellectual skill for enjoyment as well as employment; affective skills for a richer life, not just for greater employability.

II. A "HIGH-TECH, HIGH-TOUCH" SOCIETY

The Futurists

The high school has become largely a technical-training institute.

Recognition is given to such affective concerns as are implied by the "high-touch" phraseology, but no specific programs for the purpose are supplied by the high school.

The Education Reformers

The curriculum strongly emphasizes math and science requirements (and perhaps some form of compulsory introduction to computer science), but all of the "new basics" are considered essential to vocational preparation in a high-tech society.

Vocational programs as such are limited in number and focused on high-tech demands.

The "well-rounded" individual is still the primary goal of the school; therefore, the arts, physical and social development, and citizenship are still key educational concerns which demand and receive specific programs.

III. A REGIONAL/GLOBAL ECONOMY

The Futurists

The high school's vocational programs are determined by the demands of regional job markets, and are therefore planned in close cooperation with business/industry/labor.

Foreign language is taught primarily as an adjunct to the need for furthering international trade.

The Education Reformers

The "basics" are central to the curriculum as a matter of sound educational policy--but with the further expectation that they will also strengthen the economy and improve our international trade by providing an alert, appropriately-trained, and able work force.

Partnerships with business/industry/labor are used not only to insure that vocational programs are relevant, but also to elicit strong general support for the total program of the school.

Foreign language is taught not primarily for vocational/trade reasons, but as a means of furthering intellectual and personal development and fostering intercultural understanding.

IV. A DECENTRALIZED SOCIETY

The Futurists

The individual high school defines its own goals, analyzes its own problems, and determines its own programs and standards, with very little outside oversight or direction.

The Education Reformers

The individual high school is given a large measure of on-site independence and autonomy, but it is not allowed to operate without adherence to goals and standards established by district, state, and even federal authorities.

Within established frameworks, parents are deeply involved in school goal-setting; principals exercise strong instructional leadership; teachers determine and carry out appropriate instructional strategies; and students are given encouragement and opportunities to develop a sense of individual responsibility.

V. A PARTICIPATIVE DEMOCRACY

The Futurists

School goals and practices are determined by the processes of initiative and referendum (the "people" voting directly), with traditional representative democracy (as illustrated by legislatures and state and local boards of education) becoming increasingly obsolete.

The Education Reformers

Although extensive parent, teacher, and student participation in decision-making is actively encouraged, it is believed that high expectations for excellence can be realized only when rigorous standards of performance are not only <u>expected</u> but <u>enforced</u>.

Therefore, legislative mandates and state and local board requirements are still an essential basis for the successful operation of the high school.

VI. A "NETWORK" SOCIETY

The Futurists

"Networks" of persons both inside and outside the high school, bound together by common interests, knowledge, and goals, determine individual high school goals and programs.

The Education Reformers

Although the "network" concept is extensively employed in working out solutions to specific problems (e.g., evaluation of courseware for a given computer-aided instructional program), the school retains a degree of hierarchical administrative structure to assure that broad goals are achieved and specific objectives are met at an accepted level of "excellence."

VII. A "MULTIPLE-OPTIONS" SOCIETY

The Futurists

The high school reflects--even epitomizes--the emerging open-ended, multiple-option society. Essentially, anything goes.

The Education Reformers

Despite the futurists' dream of an ever-expanding acceptance of options, the high school moves in the opposite direction: stricter requirements, tougher standards, more stringent evaluation and grading; far fewer curricular choices.

Excellence is demanded not as an option to be chosen by some students, but as a demand to be met by all students, if for no other reason than as a matter of survival for a "a nation at risk."